

Humble, personable guys of Nick Rallis Band challenging one another toward success

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Abstract: On a recent cold evening, Nick Rallis sits on a wooden chair, hunched over his acoustic guitar, eyes downcast, expression inquisitive. The Oscar's gifting lounge; The Viper Room in Hollywood; the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, including shows there at the swanky Green Door Mansion Party and the ASCAP Music Cafe.

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Full text: On a recent cold evening, Nick Rallis sits on a wooden chair, hunched over his acoustic guitar, eyes downcast, expression inquisitive.

"As I make my way down to Kentucky," he sings, "as I make my way to Mississippi. Not too long I'm at Chicago. Destination I don't know."

The folk-influenced lyrics flow freely.

"Do you like that idea?" Rallis asks his bandmates. He's barefoot, wearing jeans, a grey sweatshirt and a stocking hat.

"Yeah," responds guitarist Paul Tims, seated nearby. Ryan Rickert sits perched on the cajon, a box drum, just a few feet away, dressed in jeans, a black shirt and a green army hat. Ross Wheeler, a former bassist for The Spill Canvas, also joins the trio for this rehearsal session.

The chorus "destination I don't know" could be about the band's next step.

"What's next for us? I can't tell you because I don't know," Rallis later says.

Right now, they are rehearsing in Sioux Falls - in Rallis' parents basement. But the band is quickly gaining a national audience and connections, and a future with wide open possibilities.

Their singer-songwriter sound debuted at the perfect time as other national musicians like Jason Mraz find success in that genre.

The band has considered an extended stay in Los Angeles. They have a national tour this fall, their first to include national headlining acts. Last week, while Rickert was on a mission trip to Haiti, Rallis and Tims began recording for their second album. On Monday, they signed with a producer, Josh Kaler, from South Carolina. Less than a year and a half after playing their first promoted gig together, the Nick Rallis Band already has played venues most young bands only dream about: The Oscar's gifting lounge; The Viper Room in Hollywood; the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, including shows there at the swanky Green Door Mansion Party and the ASCAP Music Cafe.

The connections came through a December 2008 performance at Tre Lounge in Sioux Falls. Visiting hunter from Los Angeles, Calif., Chris Breed, liked the band and invited them to play at Sundance last year. Breed is a partner in the Hollywood-based entertainment company Sunset Entertainment Group and has provided further networking for the band. They were invited to play Sundance again in January.

Some call it luck. These guys call it sweat equity, attributing much of the band's success to hard work and a grassroots marketing campaign.

"People are like, 'You guys are so lucky you've had this break.' We look at luck where preparation meets opportunity," Rickert says. Also, "the novelty of us being from South Dakota has been part of the appeal."

Rallis, Rickert and Tims exhibit a quiet confidence that the long hours - they book their own shows - and sacrifice are worth it.

Tims resigned in July from his position as a fifth grade teacher at Terry Redlin Elementary School. Rickert has

cut back his work as vice president and general manager for the Sioux Falls Storm.

Rallis says the band is hitting its stride musically.

Wheeler just recently started playing with the group. The band's not sure whether this will be a permanent arrangement.

Sioux Falls musician Toby Kane, who leads the Toby Kane Band, says the Rallis band has a big sound.

"It's acoustic-based but it's not low-key or dreary singer-songwriter stuff," Kane says. "It's a lot of fun. They do a nice job of working on their take on cover songs with originals that are just as good."

Their musical style positions them to do well on a national level, Kane says. "The kind of upbeat, danceable singer-songwriter stuff is a popular genre, with Jason Mraz, Eric Hutchinson," Kane says. "A lot of those guys right now are doing well."

The band tries to play in Sioux Falls at least one weekend a month, drawing a young adult crowd to shows at McNally's Irish Pub and the Copper Lounge.

The history of NRB

Tim Kant, who owns Copper Lounge and Stogeez, remembers when it was just Rallis playing the bar.

"That's all he had back then. People liked it. He progressed on from there (with) the three-piece now," Kant says. "They attract a crowd that's lively."

Tims started playing with Rallis, and Rickert joined the two in September 2008. Their first official show was that fall at the Ground Round. Then, in December, around the Tre Lounge show, they began promoting original material, Rallis says.

Rallis, the main songwriter, credits The Beatles' "Help!" album as inspiration for his style. He also listened to jam music like Phish and the Dave Matthews Band. "Within that is a percussive style I learned guitar by," Rallis says.

During a three-hour set, such as ones they usually play in Sioux Falls, they mix in originals with a few cover tunes, throwing their own spin on hits like Kings of Leon's "Use Somebody."

Jeremy Clegg, 28, has known Rallis for about seven years. He's attended shows in Los Angeles; Austin, Texas; Oklahoma City; Minneapolis and at the Sundance Film Festival.

"They're good friends, and I want to support them. I like listening to live music," he says.

The other draw of the Nick Rallis Band is that the guys are personable, Kane says. "I think that catches on. You know you're going to go have a good time as well," Kane says.

"They're not the typical band. It's music you can follow," says Kari Gaikowski, a 23-year-old Sioux Falls fan.

"They've created a fun dance environment."

Hey, Hollywood

The trio has met and seen a variety of celebrities because of their Hollywood and Sundance gigs. Louis Lombardi chauffeured them in Park City. They've ran in to Kevin Connolly of "Entourage" a few times, and he remembered them as the guys from South Dakota. Tims met Paris Hilton and her boyfriend, Doug Reinhardt, in January during a Green Door Mansion Party at Sundance.

Playing at Sundance last year allowed the trio to make connections with others in the music and film industry. "It felt like we arrived when we played Sundance. It's funny, in retrospect," Rallis says.

The band members were wide-eyed, they admit. Now, they seem to have a better grip on what it takes to succeed. They're not afraid to play new venues. Last year, they played 20 states and four Canada provinces. An oversized map in their practice space outlines tour routes - west through Colorado, Utah and into California, south to Texas, north into Canada. A red line marks a tentative route for a future tour.

While on the road, the guys use Facebook to send out messages to potential fans living in cities they're scheduled to play. The method seems to be working well so far, Rallis says.

"We're definitely challenging ourselves," Rallis says. "There's certainly power in numbers. Each day, we're challenging each other to step outside that comfort zone."

Reach reporter BryAnn Becker at 977-3908.

Nick Rallis Band

Nick Rallis, lead singer and guitarist

Age: 27

Hometown: Sioux Falls

Education: Graduated from O'Gorman High School and studied chemistry and history at the University of South Dakota

Paul Tims, guitarist and vocals

Age: 26

Hometown: Milbank

Education: Graduated from Vermillion High School and attended the University of Sioux Falls

Ryan Rickert, percussion

Age: 26

Hometown: Brandon

Education: Graduated from Brandon Valley High School and attended Montana State University

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